DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 161 JC 860 372

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TITLE A Response to Recent Board of Regents' Action on Business Administration Education and a Critique of the Call for Business Administration Accreditation.
PUB DATE [86]
NOTE 13p.; For the document critiqued in this paper, see JC 860 371.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Accountability; *Accreditation (Institutions); *Business Administration Education; Community Colleges; *Evaluation Criteria; Postsecondary Education; *Program Evaluation; *State Standards; *Statewide Planning; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

In May 1986, the Board of Regents of Higher Education in Massachusetts accepted a report of a statewide program review in postsecondary business administration education. This critique of the program review report focuses specifically on the board-adopted requirement that public senior institutions seek accreditation from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and the effect this requirement will have on statewide transfer patterns and the goal of open access to postsecondary education. After introductory comments, the paper points to major limitations of the statewide review, including the brevity of the site visits, the ambiguity of the data, and the inappropriate accountability model upon which the review was based. Next, after noting that all of the public colleges in the statewide review have regional accreditation, the paper questions the desirability of adding another layer of accreditation, pointing to the limitations of the accrediting process. An analysis is presented of AACSB accreditation, highlighting the comparability of the agency's accreditation criteria with those of the regional accrediting agency and analyzing the conditions and resources considered by the AACSB to assure institutional quality. Finally, the paper examines student transfer issues involved in the AACSB accreditation, arguing that the program review report revealed a deep misunderstanding of the role of community colleges in open access education systems and of the course-taking patterns common to community college students. (RO)

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A RESPONSE TO RECENT BOARD OF REGENTS' ACTION ON BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION AND A CRITIQUE OF THE CALL FOR BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION ACCREDITATION

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JC 860 372

A Response to Recent Board of Regents' Action
on Business Administration Education

and

A Critique of the Call
for Business Administration Accreditation

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On May 14, 1986, the Board of Regents of Higher Education accepted a report which was the culmination of a statewide program review in post-secondary business administration education. The report, entitled Business Administration: Current Trends and Future Directions, contained a number of specific findings and recommendations which were referred to in the Board's action. In effect, by accepting the recommendations of the report, the Board of Regents adopted a set of standards and guidelines for business administration education which constitute a marked departure from current practice. Through the requirement that public senior institutions seek accreditation from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (the AACSB), the Regents intend to impose this model over the next five years. This departure will cost the state literally millions of dollars, will change the nature of many institutions, and will have a significant negative impact on statewide transfer patterns and the goal of open access to the higher education system. The fact that the new direction is totally redundant and based on an antiquated notion of institutional accountability deserves serious scrutiny by everyone concerned with higher education in our state. In point of fact, the new accreditation standards will in no way guarantee quality any more than current practice does now.

A Review of the Recent Review

The statewide review was aimed at three categories of institutions: public senior institutions ("universities" and "state colleges"), private institutions, and public community colleges. The review was conducted by a group of five out-of-state business school deans or former deans who made up teams which managed to visit thirty-five institutions during two weeks in the Fall of 1984 and during February of 1985. As one might imagine, the visits were necessarily brief. In addition, the teams received ambiguous data from the schools which participated in the review, owing in part to the organization of the review and to the forms which were used to gather data.

In the words of the reviewers themselves,

> For each of the three groups (of schools) conflicting reports of information made accuracy difficult. Furthermore, visits were very short so that the teams had no time to delve into inconsistencies or examine possible weaknesses or strengths in depth. The factual

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> information in the reports is that reported by the institutions. Thus the finds (sic) and recommendations in the reports are best viewed as concerns for further in-depth review before decisive action is taken.

Yet even with this explicit caveat, the Regents have not taken the findings and recommendations as concerns for further study. They have chosen instead to spend five million dollars over the next five years to implement the recommendations of the report. Indeed, the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs has even written to the campuses that: "The Academic Affairs Division will be responsible for the implementation of the recommendations." (R.Schinness to institutional presidents, dated June 6, 1986). So much for further study prior to decisive action.

There is a major flaw in Current Trends and Future Directions. However, it does not lie in the reviewers themselves. They came to Massachusetts to perform a role they had often played before and they relied on a list of standards which they were long accustomed to employing. Anyone with any knowledge of who they were would have anticipated their findings. The major flaw in the review lies in the accountability model upon which it is based. That model does not include consideration of the outcomes of business education. No one administered standard examinations to students, compared what students knew after their schooling to what they knew before, ever looked at student competencies, or even asked students any questions. Yet the reviewers did not hesitate to emphatically conclude:

> "Business programs in the state colleges were found to need significant improvement in their quality."
>
> "Quality of faculty (at state colleges) must be enhanced."
>
> "Minimal emphasis (at state colleges) is placed on communication skills."

These statements may or may not be true. The point to be noted is that the reviewers made these assertions on the basis of absolutely no outcome data. For example, because a curriculum contains few courses labeled "English" or "Communications"is no reason to believe that all the other courses in the curriculum do not emphasize "communication skills" and that students are not learning those skills. About all that can be accepted without reservation from the review's findings is the statement that "Curricula do not meet AACSB standards." That is certainly true. But then only the University of Massachusetts at Amherst held AACSB accreditation going into the review.

Accreditation: The Myth of More is Better

All of the public colleges in the statewide review have regional accreditation. The Regents are calling for additional accreditation, this time from the AACSB. The demand for another layer of accreditation implies that the warranty from the regional association is subject to question. If it is, more of the same kind of accreditation is hardly the answer. The real issue to be addressed is accountability, which has been defined as any school's ability to deliver on its educational promises. How does an outsider know that a school is really

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performing its function? Accreditation is the most common method of answering this question. But it only answers the question indirectly and it suffers from severe limitations.

All forms of accreditation are open to criticism because of the basic nature of the accrediting model. For one thing, the process is susceptible to compromise by the professional entanglements of the accreditors. It is worth remembering that the reviewers and the reviewed are all players in the same game. For another, the accrediting model itself is but one half of a true input-output accountability analysis. An ideal model would look first at the components of educational service, the so-called inputs to schools (factors such as stated goals, number of faculty, number of faculty with doctorates, number of books in the library, average class size, available computer time, floor space and the like) and then at the results of the process, i.e. the changes which occur in students (achievement, the development of competencies, improved values). An ideal model would estimate "value-added," would indicate how the system produced those outcomes, and would provide feedback to instructors and to institutions. But accreditation only looks at inputs, the conditions which ought to encourage learning. It does not examine outcomes in order to confirm that resources have been used effectively. It is in this sense accreditation from a regional association and from the AACSB amount to virtually the same thing, with only the name of the warrantor changed in the case of programmatic review. Both processes involve self-study and visitation. Both processes look at institutional goals and the resources at hand to achieve those goals. Both processes issue warranties on the basis of common assumptions. However, neither approaches the ideal and attests to outcomes. Therefore, neither process is a true accountability model and coupling them together will not produce the ideal either. Indeed, the proposal to add accreditation on top of accreditation will hardly improve quality. It will only increase costs by requiring more reviews of the same type which occur now. No doubt the notion appeals to the more-is-better school of educational administration and perhaps to those who want to do something tangible for the system. For the result of money spent to achieve AACSB accreditation will surely be AACSB accreditation and that warranty is tangible in that it can be referenced, published and advertised. But it is also artificial and carries with it severe consequences for the community colleges. If the Regents really want to promote "quality"-the term used constantly in Current Trends and Future Directions-they would be better advised to abandon the duplication which AACSB accreditation portends and to support instead institutional evaluation research at the senior institutions and whatever measures that research might suggest. At the very least, if they remain persuaded of the AACSB's resource prescriptions, let them establish the conditions but not seek the warranty. In that way the community colleges and the higher education system will not be subjected to the negative consequences of the AACSB's prescriptions.

Before proceeding any further, however, the Regents ought to examine the issue of AACSB accreditation very closely and consider the implications of accepting AACSB standards.

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AACSB Accreditation: An Analysis

The heart of the AACSB accreditation process is contained in "Accreditation Standards and Guidelines for Business Administration Programs," a statement most recently revised in April of 1985. Under "Standards and Guidelines," the purpose of accreditation is said to be the fostering of "high quality in education for business administration". The statement then sets forth eight accreditation criteria which must be met by institutions seeking the Assembly's warranty.

1. Mission and Objectives: The school must realistically state its mission and establish orderly methods for achieving that mission.

2. Admission of Students: Admission policy for high school and transfer students must be clearly stated and, together with retention standards, must compare favorably with those of the institution as a whole.

3. Personnel: The school must possess sufficient academic and support personnel of sufficient quality and in sufficient quantity to foster overall high quality.

4. Curriculum: The school's curriculum must prepare students broadly for citizenship and leadership and specifically in five areas of business administration study.

5. Library and Computer Resources, Facilities and Services: The school must possess these support items in sufficient amount to meet the stated mission.

6. Financial Resources, Facilities and Equipment: The school must possess facilities suitable to the stated mission and must allocate budget sufficient for the unit. (To determine sufficiency, "comparisons with support levels allocated to other relevant programs at the institution may be pertinent.")

7. Educational Innovation and Technology: Innovation, especially that which advances quality, is encouraged.

8. Maintenance of Accreditation: Member schools are expected to continue their adherence to the standards.

These criteria have received very little attention, either nationally or from those who would now impose AACSB accreditation on the Massachusetts higher education system. It is worth noting that these criteria, together with AACSB prescribed "preconditions" stated elsewhere, bear a striking resemblance to the accreditation evaluative criteria of the regional accrediting associations. In fact, a review of the published evaluative criteria of the commissions on higher education of the six regional accrediting associations indicates that all six stipulate essentially the same evaluative criteria as the AACSB. Since this is so, one might reasonably ask why schools already accredited according to these criteria would want to employ the list again to seek a second warranty. One might also ask, justifiably, what relation exists between these criteria and the intended outcomes of higher education.

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The AACSB accreditation process assumes that specific conditions and resources assure institutional quality. There are no empirical grounds for this assumption. To say that a school of business is autonomous, has its own dean, or has certain expenditures per student or a desired level of computer support is in no way an assurance that student learning occurs at specified levels. Yet that is what defenders say AACSB's accreditation implies. Let us turn to a few examples of the conditions which are said to produce "quality".

1. The school should clearly state its mission and should be evaluated on the basis of it.

2. A specified number of faculty must hold doctorates.

3. The school should have achieved a "critical mass" of faculty.

4. The full-time equivalent faculty must be not less than the following: for the undergraduate program, one FTE per 400 student credit hours taught per term.

5. The full-time faculty required must be at least 75% of the full-time equivalent faculty required.

6. Faculty members should not teach more than 12 credit hours per week, have more than three preparations per week, nor teach in more than two fields.

7. "An undergraduate school of business should concentrate its professional courses in the last two years of a four-year program, and should offer only a limited amount of work below the junior year."

Taking these criteria in the order given,

1. Accrediting a particular institution in terms of its stated mission assumes that all applicant institutions have worthy purposes.The implication is that any school could be accredited without assessing the merit of its mission. The only stipulation that the AACSB adds to this criterion is that the mission must be congruent with the other inputs contained in the guidelines. While this standard obviously encourages diversity, it is hardly the sort of criteria which inspires confidence.

2. Stipulating the number of faculty holding doctorates assumes a production model for higher education. Indeed, almost all of the AACSB's criteria assume such a model. In a recent treatment of accrediting practices, William E. Troutt pointed this out about accreditation in general. He says that accrediting bodies "generally check on the quality of the assembly line, i.e., curricula, faculty, resources, etc. The criteria assume a direct relationship exists between the quality of the assembly line and the quality of the product." This is a belief congruent with the archaic state of educational research a half century ago. There are now much better mechanisms available to assess outcomes and we no longer need rely solely on assumptions.

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As for the criterion on doctorates, there is no evidence that student achievement is any higher under Ph.D.'s and DBA's than under MA's and MBA's. If the AACSB has accumulated data on the question, they ought to publish it for the benefit of the rest of us.

3. "Critical mass," like many other terms used by the AACSB, is sufficently ambiguous to qualify as a "professional" term; that is, it sounds official enough to outsiders for them to leave it alone but it provides insiders with enough room to define it in any way they like.

4. The stipulation of one FTE per 400 students, together with other AACSB prescriptions on faculty workload, works out to one faculty to a little over thirty students. This ratio has a venerable tradition in education, as has been elucidated by Alvin Eurich in Reforming American Education.

> For many years I wondered where the idea of an ideal fixed teacher-student ratio came from. Finally, with the aid of a Talmudic scholar, I learned that in the Babylonian Talmud a rule was established by Rabbi Raba, an authoriative sage of the third century A.D.: 'Twenty-five students are to be enrolled in one class. If there are from 25 to 40, an assistant must be obtained. Above 40, two teachers are engaged.' This rule, established long before the days of printed books, understandably reflected even earlier practices. Rigidly to accept today such a fixed ratio is like adhering to Ptolemy's theory of the universe after Einstein has introduced his theory of relativity.

To address the question of ideal class size, Eurich quotes the comprehensive summary of fifty years of educational research contained in the Encyclopedia of Educational Research.

> Is there an optimum class size?...There is nothing in evidence to suggest that large class sizes materially affect attainment in subject matter under teaching techniques considered typical at that time. Subsequent studies of the relation of class size to student attention, discipline, self-reliance, attitudes, and work habits failed to establish a research basis for decisions on class size.

To their credit, AACSB has moved beyond the rigidity of the ancient rule. They do not insist on a fixed ratio. Rather, they insist on a total complement of teachers who could be equated to the ancient rule if all of them were teaching. Using this resource allocation criterion, AACSB allows business schools certain deviations:

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> Qualitative attributes of personnel resources, including consideration of the process by which those resources are allocated, organized, and managed may be found to compensate for failure to achieve quantitative measures.

Hocus Pocus. This provision enables faculty to hold large classes so that they may teach fewer preparations, may be released from some of their sections, or may fill other special assignments, including their own research. "Thirty-to-one" is merely AACSB's means of protecting a business school's share of an institution's resources.

5. Again, 75% of the faculty being full-time is an idea congruent with the production model and mentality. As a stipulation, it raises many questions. How, for example, would AACSB view full-time faculty from one accredited school who teach at another? Or business school deans who teach? Or faculty whose split appointments extend into non-business fields? Indeed, exactly what the 75% criterion is aimed at (total workload? an individual's primary role classification? their perceived degree of commitment to a particular school?) is unclear. The most obvious interpretation, of course, relates to the effectiveness of part-time faculty. On this there is absolutely no empirical data indicating that student achievement is higher under full-time faculty than under part-time faculty. Many part-time faculty bring with them practitioners' insights and savy which raise educational standards and stimulate students. To dictate the percentage of part-timers which is allowable, without any evidence of their diminished effectiveness, is arbitrary and sounds more like a union's collective bargaining position than a precondition to excellence prescribed by a standards group.

6. It is assumed that faculty who teach more than 12 credits per week will be less effective. If this is so, should there not be rules against full-time faculty being allowed to teach elsewhere for fear that their effectivness might also be diminished? Or against part-time jobs, like consulting? Or against faculty living lives which carry excessive personal demands? The limitations on three preparations and two fields are similarly arbitrary and ambiguous: What is a preparation? What is a field? The implication is that a diversity of fields and preparations is time consuming and taxing. This may very well be true. But to limit the effects of some factors but not the effects of others is inconsistent.

7. Of all the AACSB criteria, concentrating professional courses in the last two years of a four year curriculum is the stipulation that most divides the community college sector from the business school branch of higher education. The grounds for this prescription are certainly not empirical. Rather the criterion represents an arbitrary judgement made in the hope that undergraduate general education programs fulfill their advertised promises. Ironically, for many students study in business administration might be more effective in developing the very attitudes and attributes commonly assumed to be outcomes of liberal arts education, namely communications and quantification skills, critical thinking, inference, judgement, appreciation of evidence, and the cultivation of research skills.

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The Transfer Issue Involved in AACSB Accreditation.

The application of the course level criterion by the reviewing team revealed their deep misunderstanding of the role of community colleges in open access higher education systems. It was this notion of appropriate level which no doubt prompted the reviewers to list among the "Major Problems" in Massachusetts the fact that, "Career track program students (from community colleges) transfer to business administration programs at senior institutions in great numbers". The insensitivity to student achievement which this conclusion represents is truly enormous. The point which the reviewers were trying to make was that traditionally business administration students at universities study liberal arts courses in their first two years and later they major in business administration. Since this model has worked for universities for years, the reviewers and the AACSB see no reason for change. But community colleges have created a whole new model. They have built educational programs on the basis of student motivation to learn skills and competencies which are related to employment opportunities. This approach has prompted many students to enroll who would have been put off by the older university model. The "problem" that the reviewers have misapprehended is that students who enroll in these programs often learn to appreciate higher education and want more of it. This is a problem only in the sense that senior institutions must now adapt to serve different student needs because the development of community college business administration students has not been along traditional lines. The real friction between the community colleges and the schools of business stems from this source. Rather than adapt to the new students, the schools of business prefer to demand that the new students fit into the traditional molds. This is why the reviewers faulted the community colleges for "poor advisement." In their opinion, students who might transfer to schools of business ought to be identified early and put into the proper track. What this viewpoint neglects is that the students might reject higher education entirely if they are forced into the "proper track" too early.

The intention of the AACSB to preserve the status quo has prompted their creation of a whole corpus of spurious educational arguments in support of their position. But their arguments only becloud the real issue, which is that senior institutions are simply unwilling to adapt to a system of higher education which includes community colleges and the ideal of open access. For the schools of business to resist change is understandable. And the AACSB, after all, amounts to little more than a trade group which represents them. But for the Regents to acquiesce to the AACSB's claims is incomprehensible, for it is the Regents who are responsible for articulating the sectors of the higher education system and whose stewardship supposedly guarantees the public's right to access.

Since transfer is a pivotal issue in the accreditation controversy, let us look more closely at the central dictate of the AACSB that undergraduate schools of business should concentrate professional courses in the last two years of a four year program and examine that dictate's merit.

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On its face this AACSB standard appears laudatory. As the framers of the standards say in one of their publications,

> This philosophic approach suggests that professional education in business administration and management builds upon prior knowledge of related disciplines in order to permit an appropriate combination of descriptive and analytical approaches to the study of business. Marketing, for example, when taught to students who do not have a background in disciplines (of the liberal arts) is often no more than a description of how to close a sale... On the other hand, when students are given an opportunity to acquire a prior background in fields such as psychology, sociology, statistics, and communications, then buyer behavior, sales, and consumer motivation...become meaningful and existing concepts, even in an introductory course.

But what, exactly, should the prior background entail? AACSB makes only a general statement on the requirements of the first two years. Their model curriculum stipulates twenty-seven credits in Science/Math/Behavioral Science/ Humanities/Fine Arts. It also allows for electives while requiring that 40% of total baccalaureate coursework be in non-business subjects ("Most good schools," they say, "approach 50%"). The model curriculum offers no real guidance on what outcomes are necessary for optimum preparation for professional coursework. It is simplistic to recommend, "a prior background in fields such as psychology, sociology, statistics and communications," when there are a multitude of possible outcomes to such courses, many of which are parallel to the outcomes of business administration courses. If specific outcomes cannot be stated as expectations and if those outcomes cannot be shown to be unique, then what is the sense of dictating to community college students that liberal arts courses are acceptable in transfer but business administration courses are not? Under such circumstances, reserving professional courses for the upper division amounts to a mere time requirment. Perhaps what the AACSB wants is greater student "maturity." If that is so, consideration should be given to the kinds of students community colleges enroll, i.e. students who are often older, working, and quite mature.

If prior outcomes can be shown to foster improved achievement in professional courses, why could not the first two years contain the specified sequence? Since many community college students enroll part-time for years, there is ample time for sequenced courses in part-time programs. Students take courses serially anyway. In any case, the accreditation stipulations on course levels appear arbitrary in the extreme. Or are we to believe that there are common student competencies which derive from the diversity of liberal arts courses allowable at different AACSB schools which uniformly prepare students for upper division professional study? An affirmative answer to this question would be an assault on good sense.

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It should be noted that AACSB does allow for some professional courses to be taken in the lower division. In discussing its "Standard IV," the Assembly notes,

> Examples of courses which might be offered at the lower division level are: Principles of Accounting, Principles of Economics, Business Law, Statistics and Introduction to Business. Examples of courses which should be offered only at upper division level are: Principles of Finance Principles of Management and Principles of Marketing

A critique of AACSB policies which was recently published by the New York Council of Two-Year College Business Faculty Administrators questioned why some professional courses (Principles of Accounting, Economics, Business Law, Statistics, and Introduction to Business) were allowed while other courses (Principles of Finance, Management and Marketing) were not. Why only some, the New York educators asked. They continued,

> To argue the need for academic maturity in order for lower division students to be able to effectively handle those excluded courses is simply not supported by any known credible empirical evidence...To further muddy the water, the suggestion that students are sufficiently mature for foundation work at the lower division and not for the excluded principles courses..is again not supported by any compelling empirical evidence....

The New York group further characterized the overall impact of AACSB accreditation as "administratively onerous and self-serving to upper level business programs."

While the AACSB recommends certain courses be taught at either the lower or upper levels, they actually refer curriculum choices to their individual member schools. Each AACSB school decides at what level courses should be taught.

In their statement on transfer arrangements, the AACSB stipulates,

> Whether or not an articulation agreement is present, the baccalaureate degree-granting institution will use validation procedures each time a student takes a course at the lower division level which the degree-granting institution offers at the upper division level and which is to be accepted for upper division credit....

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In other words, if State U. offers either Finance (an AACSB recommended upper level course) or Accounting (seemingly lower level but perhaps upper level if State U. opted to give it there), validation procedures will be in order. If they are, transfer students will be required to endure them. Validation procedures come in the form of CLEP tests, written examinations prepared by the degree-granting institution, or successful completion of advanced courses. More often than not, however, validation is in the form of an off-the-shelf final examination geared to a particular textbook, the class notes of a particular instructor, and in a format which is unfamiliar to the community college student who may have taken his/her own version of the course up to two years earlier (or longer if the student was part-time). There are, quite obviously, numerous inequities at work here but the most odious is that, under such conditions, transfer students are subjected to standards different from those of students who originally enroll in AACSB schools. In short, in no instance do AACSB schools require demonstrations of achievement by their own students. This was noted above to be a major flaw in the accreditation procedures. But having overlooked student achievement as an indicator of institutional quality for its own members, the AACSB hesitates not at all to require achievement demonstrations by transfers. Community college educators ask why this inconsistency is to be tolerated in a seemingly articulated system of higher education.

Business programs in Massachusetts state-supported colleges were reviewed by a team of five business educators, three of whom were past presidents of the AACSB. They used as their criteria for evaluation the AACSB standards. It is not surprising that their recommendations followed along the lines of the AACSB standards and that they suggested AACSB accreditation. But it is worth noting that the AACSB standards are simply a statement of conditions and resources, not a statement of outcomes expected of students. They focus on inputs and processes and assume a production model of educational service. Nowhere does AACSB define quality expect through their insistence that accredited schools must have it. And nowhere does the AACSB evaluate the outcomes of the educational process except when the standards are applied to outsiders whose achievement must be "validated". Is there variation, one might ask, in the quality of AACSB accredited schools? Only true evaluation would tell. If the Regents are serious about implementing the Business review's recommendations, they should ask what will be the costs of AACSB accreditation for all of the senior institutions? What will be the implications--especially the barriers which will be erected to open access to the higher education system through the community colleges? Why should community college students be forced to undergo achievement testing when senior college students do not? And, finally, is there anything--repeat anything--to be accomplished by AACSB accreditation which could not be accomplished under the accreditation arrangements which exist now?

For the AACSB, however, a stance on all these issues is easy: they gain as dues paying members all the senior institutions in a progressive and influential state, something they have not been able to achieve since they began operations in 1919.

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